

Social Networks for Social Changes: Case Study of Facebook Group Anonymous Hrvatska (Croatia)

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Abstract

Two-way communication, participation in creating and sharing content on the Internet and complete human experience enabled in cyberspace or social media affected the emergence of a new form of culture – real virtuality. Social power transforms and moves to cyberspace. The Internet became the most democratic medium and a framework for updating information on various problems and planning actions in order to solve them. This sets up new aspects of resistance and social organizing. The Internet is a powerful technological weapon, and if used in responsible and proper manner, it can be a meaningful instrument to achieve social changes. This research paper thus investigates social networks as tools to achieve social changes, or means for communication and organization of protests, and in broader sense tools for activism. Beside theoretical background and examples of social networks usage for the purpose of protest coordination and organization and communication among activists, such as Arabian Spring and Occupy Wall Street, this paper presents a case study of the Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska, which was used to organise a couple of protests in Croatia but which did not achieve much attention.

The aim of this research paper is primarily to get deeper insight in the role that social networks play in social movements. Next we try to answer whether social networks are just communication tools for organizing protests or whether they even can be catalysts for changes. Furthermore, the goal is to

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explore the communication and organization of protests in Croatia based on a case study of Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska – to investigate if there are some significant differences in ways of using social networks in this context compared to the previous cases.

Keywords: Social networks, Protests, Activism, Group Anonymous Hrvatska

1 Introduction and theoretical background

Over the last decade or so we are witnessing the growing quantity of social unrest all over the world. The reasons for protesting differ considering disparate parts of the world, but also coincide since there are some political, economic and social issues on a global level. The protests in Western countries took place mainly because of financial crisis, corrupted governments, neo-liberal capitalism, poverty, inequality etc., and in Eastern countries because of totalitarian regimes, indigence, human rights violations, unemployment and also corruption. The Arab Spring is maybe the most notable protest, for it demonstrates the revolutionary wave of uprising and civil disobedience all across Middle East and North Africa that lasted from 2010 till 2012, and since there are some ongoing riots it is now called Arab Winter. The consequences of these large scale protests vary from status quo to governmental changes and even to overthrown governments. Some major protests led to civil wars like in Iraq and Syria. The Arab Spring, especially the Tunisian and Egyptian revolution, inspired a great deal of protests in Europe, Asia, North and South America. Some of these are: nationwide protests across Greece (2010–2012), UK, China, India, Bolivia, Portugal (2011), Chile, Spain, Iran (2011–2012), Russia (2011–2013), Romania, Slovenia (2012), Turkey, Argentina (2013) and Ukraine (2013 – ongoing), unrest in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014) and Occupy Wall Street (2011) which started in U.S. and then spread to almost every corner of the world thus becoming a worldwide protest for global change and democracy.¹ During 2013 and 2014 there were few attempts to organize protests in Croatia. They were inspired by the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, but unlike those events

¹ Wikipedia. Retrieved January 14, 2015 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_Arab_Spring

failed to produce any results. The wider public did not respond to protests and mass media showed no interest in covering the story about few protesters, so the continuation of similar events seemed pointless. What makes these protests and rebellions, including the Croatian case, so unique is the use of Internet-based technologies for communication and organization before and during protests. The usage of social media/networks, like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, 4chan etc., in civic activism, social movements and achieving social changes, has never been so common and somehow natural, thus urging the experts from different scientific fields to research the role and importance of social media in this context. Social networks utilization sets up new aspects of resistance and social organizing. The Arab Spring demonstrates the use of social or private networks to effectively inform the public in the country or outside the country and to organize in times when most of the media are under control or censorship (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011). Usage of social media in the Arab world gave women a chance to be heard and participate in protests thereby risking their lives since they are otherwise facing discrimination and lack of freedom of choice (Shihada, 2011). Occupy Wall Street shows how one can raise awareness, mobilize and organize via social media, and how ICTs helped mass gatherings to happen. What happens here is a paradigm shift – from one-way communication, (over what is known as Web 2.0 which allows users to participate and contribute to content making or sharing) to collision of virtual and physical reality (termed as hyperreality 2.0). Internet personalization and individualization led to cyberspace immersion into reality: what is happening on the Internet ceased to stay there and went to the square (Žakula, 2012). The world entered into a new socio-political moment: the revolution supported by new technologies – cyberrevolution or revolution 2.0. Based on such theoretical descriptions the master thesis further deals with terms of activism and hacktivism in the light of digital technologies, explains the use of social networks as tools for protest communication and organization and covers the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and protests in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also reflects on cyberspace in terms of political and economic sphere and introduces the reader with concepts of cybercapitalism, cybercommunism, cyberdemocracy and cybertopias. The research thus investigates social networks as tools to achieve social changes, or means for communication and organization of protests, and in broader sense tools for activism. The thesis observes social changes – meaning changes that substantially transform society and bring quality that did not exist before.

2 Methodology

Studying the way activists from previously mentioned protests were able to raise awareness on global scale and organize themselves via social media and then take actions to the streets demanding those social changes, I was keen to find out why the same attempts failed in Croatia. The thesis accordingly, presents the case study of Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska (Croatia), by which a couple of protests have been organized in Croatia in 2013 and 2014, but they can not be classified even as minor protests, let alone major ones. Anonymous collective from Croatia organized protests with the aim of encouraging the process of revolutionary change. Concrete demands were not formulated – their wish was to stimulate people to make a stand against capitalism and existing system that enslaves and exploits people and in which there is no social equality. Protests took place under the same slogan as Occupy Wall Street and other protests around the world – united for global change and democracy. The purpose of this research was to: 1. get deeper insight in a role that social networks have in social movements, and thus social changes; 2. to answer wheather social networks are just communication tools for organizing protests, or can be catalysts for changes; 3. to explore communication and organization of protests in Croatia based on case study of Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska – to investigate if there were some significant differences in ways of using social networks in this context, compared with other cases, that could have led to poor outcome. The case study method was chosen because of its ability to answer how and why certain programme functioned. It is also preferable to use this method in researching contemporary events – case study investigates contemporary phenomenon within its real life context (Yin, 2007: 24). The global nature of the Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska, considered by this method, was then compared to other similar cases mentioned before: the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, protests in BiH. Intentional apposite sample for this research were political activists gathered around the Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska who participated in protests organization in Croatia. Two methods were used to examine the communication and protest organization: 1. content analysis of the Facebook page and member's activity; 2. semi-structured interview with group administrators which took place via Facebook and consisted of 12 questions. The results obtained were then analyzed by drawing conclusions

from data gathered i.e. inductive analysis and creative synthesis, but also by relying on theoretical findings.

3 Results and conclusion

The research revealed that social media could be an efficient tool for communication and organization of protest if used in proper and practical manner, if all members' opinions and ideas are equally acknowledged, all content that raises awareness shared, messages and causes brought to all parts of society (urban, rural, transnational and global sphere), all content relevant and actual to the group cause broadcasted. However, revolutions and social changes require organization, funding and mass response (Leggio, 2008). Revolutions take time and for social changes to be obtained, the use of social media is not enough. It should be also mentioned that the role of social media changes in different situations, like when protests already started. It is easier to mobilize people during the unrest when the media coverage, global support and networking are already in power. They also have different way of usage according to different cultures. So the conclusion to the first research question about the role of social media in social changes is next: social networks are in many cases facilitators of easy communication, organization and mobilization, but their role is overrated. They can help affect public opinion but not transform opinion into action. It is on people to make a stand, only they can act and react. This brings us to the second research question whether social media are just tools for communication and protest organization or could be catalysts of social change. Before and during the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and Bosnia and Herzegovina unrest activists used social networks and Internet in general to spread their message and information and to persuade more people to join their cause. People stood behind organization and used social media to facilitate their actions in sense of connecting with other activists and to disseminate information on global scale. One should bear in mind that the Arab countries were under totalitarian regimes and the usage of private or public networks was necessary due to censorship and control. The Arab Spring had a great impact on people all around the world, thus causing Occupy Wall Street and many other successful protests. And it was only a matter of time when it will start burning in BiH due to very bad eco-

nomic, political and social situation. This does not mean that the situation in Croatia is not serious. It just proves that social media do not decide about social changes, demos does. Technologies are merely tools of mediation and cannot be catalysts of social change. From an interview with Facebook group Anonymous Hrvatska administrators, it was found out that Anonymous activists used social network the same way as activists in the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and BiH. There was no hierarchy among members, they communicated and spread information via social media and face-to-face, they shared actual and relevant content to raise awareness, stated the causes of their actions and cooperated with similar groups. However, in Croatia, there was no media coverage and due to digital divide information ceased to arrive to all social groups. On the other hand, events of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and BiH were transnationally broadcasted and because of that were globally supported making activists around the world to connect and unite. From the content analysis of the Facebook page it was revealed that group members or fans in Croatia were pretty passive in discussion participation and did not highly respond to protests information. Anonymous Hrvatska, failed to actively engage people in displaying problems and proposing solutions. The member's activity was not quantitatively measured. It was determined by the Facebook page analysis – which included scrolling complete page and keeping track of every *post*, *like* and *comment* – that the member's response to shared content was very weak. There was an evident lack of discussion and polemic on different content appropriate to group's cause. The outcome of my analysis is that Croatian citizens are distrustful of the Anonymous collective and their protests, especially for the reason of anonymity.

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